A Landscape of "Undesigned Design" in Rural Japan

Chris McMorran

ABSTRACT Rural landscapes have long stimulated nostalgia for a simpler time and place. In contemporary Japan, real economic and social problems in the countryside have brought new attention to the role of rural communities in the formation of Japanese identity. In this paper I introduce Kurokawa, a hot springs resort that has spent the past three decades emulating the rural idyll through what it calls *fūkeizukuri*, or "landscape design," en route to becoming one of Japan's best known rural tourist destinations. I contextualize Kurokawa's adoption of a themed landscape in the mid-1980s, and explain the design choices that have gained Kurokawa so much attention, including those found in the built and natural environment. Here, I emphasize the role local actors have played in creating and enacting the landscape. I conclude by showing how the village's adoption of a nostalgic rural theme has strengthened its status as not only an exemplar of the idealized aesthetics and social relations of the past, but also a rare rural community successfully adapting to the present.

KEYWORDS Landscape, tourism, Japan, theme, nostalgia

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INTRODUCTION

The hot springs resort of Kurokawa lies deep in the mountains of central Kyūshū, approximately 80 miles southeast of the regional hub of Fukuoka. Kurokawa is a rare bright spot in a Japanese countryside suffering from the problems of rural outmigration and economic decline found elsewhere in the world. In contrast, Kurokawa has thrived thanks to tourism. Since the mid-1980s, Kurokawa has emerged from obscurity to become one of the country's best-known hot springs resorts and a major tourist destination in the region. The village of a few hundred permanent residents annually draws around a million tourists who soak in the springs, purchase souvenirs, stay in one of 25 traditional inns, and otherwise enjoy its rural landscape (Kurokawa Onsen Kankō Ryokan Kyōdō Kumiai 2012a). Although little known outside the country, Kurokawa has attracted attention from more than tourists. Japanese academics, planners, landscape architects, and designers have taken an interest in this little mountain village. In 2007, Kurokawa even received the Japan Institute of Design Promotion's "Good Design Award," in recognition for its nostalgic village landscape that "at a glance appears undesigned" (*ikken nanimo dezain shiteinai youni mieru*) (S&T Institute of Environmental Planning and Design 2008, 34).

In this paper I analyze Kurokawa's "undesigned" tourist landscape and the decades of *fūkeizukuri*, or "landscape design," that shaped it. I explain Kurokawa's adoption of the theme of the *furusato*, or "hometown," in the mid-1980s, when postwar nostalgia for the Japanese countryside became widespread, and I discuss how Kurokawa continues to profit from a collective fear that Japan's rural villages are vanishing, thereby threatening a perceived source of Japanese cultural identity. Then I explore the design choices that

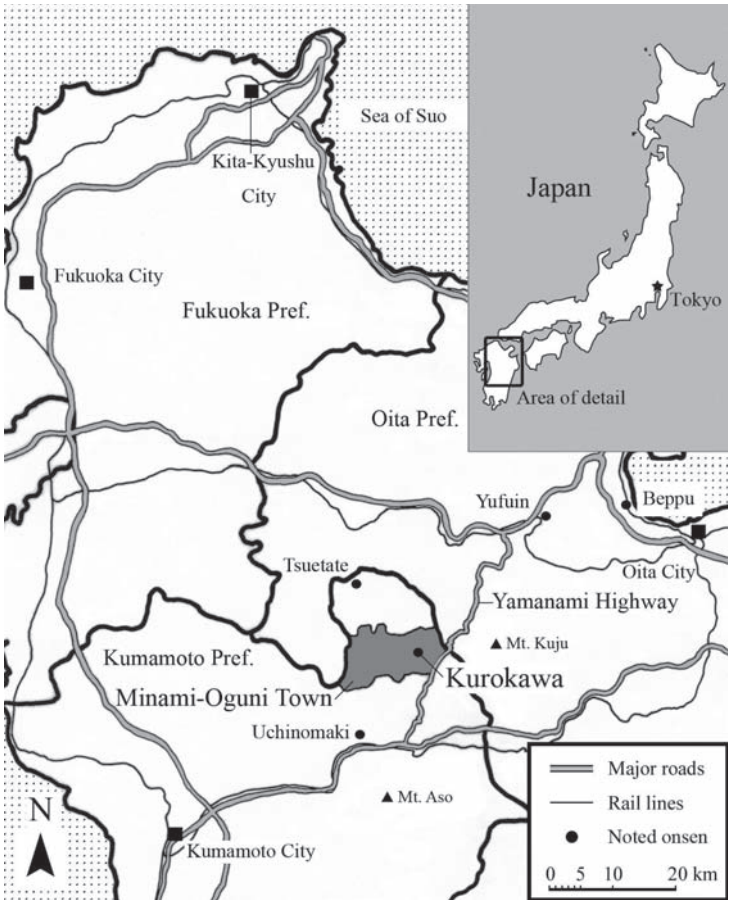

Figure 1
Kurokawa and northern Kyūshū.
(Courtesy of Chris McMorran, 2013)

embody the collective cultural heritage of the *furusato*, which have gained Kurokawa so much attention, including those found in the built and natural environment. Here, I emphasize the role local actors have played in creating and enacting the landscape. As I show, this role is highlighted in the narrative of *fūkeizukuri*, which strengthens the village's status as not only an exemplar of the idealized aesthetics and social relations of the past, but also a rare rural community successfully adapting to the present. Overall, Kurokawa offers a non-Western example of a themed tourist landscape that presents an idealized past for cultural and political gain, while adapting to contemporary needs.

I base this study on twelve months of fieldwork conducted in Kurokawa and surrounding villages between 2004 and 2007. I interviewed business owners and residents, shadowed inn workers, and conducted participant observation in seven inns. This included 10 to 12-hour workdays spent shuttling guests to and from the village bus stop, sweeping paths, scrubbing indoor and outdoor baths, washing dishes, cleaning rooms, and countless other tasks required to make guests feel "at home" (see McMorran 2012). My interests in the tourist landscape and my willingness to work in Kurokawa's inns and get my hands dirty, so to speak, opened doors among landscape planners, business owners, and residents who consider their landscape work their legacy to their families and the region. Interviews were informal and did not follow any script; however, the conversation inevitably linked to the landscape, a topic respondents were very vocal about. In some cases, I was fortunate to interview locals while walking through the landscape, which prompted comments on specific landscape design elements. I also analyzed media about Kurokawa, including travel magazines, brochures, webpages, planning guides, and television programs, all of which celebrate its landscape design and bolster its narrative. Finally, I sent follow-up emails and conducted follow-up interviews with locals during short annual visits from 2008–13. This combination of participation in landscape design, discussion with landscape designers, and analysis of media featuring the landscape provided a multi-method approach to understand the relevance of landscape design in Kurokawa.

Figure 2
Aerial view of Kurokawa. (From Kurokawa Onsen no fūkeizukuri, p. 7. Reprint courtesy of S&T Institute of Environmental Planning and Design)

Figure 3
Built in 1993, the Kaze no ya ("wind hut") hosts the Kurokawa Onsen Tourist Ryokan Association and tourist information center. (From Kurokawa Onsen no fūkeizukuri, p. 15. Reprint courtesy of S&T Institute of Environmental Planning and Design)

A LANDSCAPE OF "UNDESIGNED DESIGN"

Hemmed in by steep hills, Kurokawa consists of a few dozen inns, hotels, shops, cafés and homes clustered along the Ta no hara river (Figures 1, 2). With the nearest railway station nearly an hour away, all guests arrive by car or bus, winding along mountain roads. Most visitors first stop at the Kaze no ya (literally "wind hut"), the de facto information center and headquarters of the Kurokawa Onsen Tourist Ryokan Association, or *kumiai* as it is called by locals (Figure 3). Before exploring the town's steep narrow streets on foot, they collect maps and seek advice on which outdoor baths to try. They may visit the shop with the shoulder-high doorway that sells locally distilled spirits, the restaurant with hand-made buckwheat noodles, or the pastry shop whose cream puffs occasionally attract a queue out the door. As they walk through the village, visitors often photograph themselves next to the tree-lined river and in front of inns and shops.

Located at an elevation of 2300 feet, the resort can be covered in snow, exploding with the colors of flowers and foliage, or cooler than the sweltering cities below, depending on the season. For most of the year, however, it floats in a sea of green. Straight rows of plantation forests, primarily Japanese cedar (*Cryptomeria japonica*, or *sugi*), line the hillsides, while in the midst of Kurokawa, mixed deciduous and coniferous species stand amid flowering shrubs, enveloping structures and decorating roadsides. Dark wooden signs with Japanese and English script point to businesses, and all buildings follow a similar pattern: built one to three stories high and painted beige or dark mustard, with black roofs and trim (Figure 4). The overall effect gives Kurokawa a timeless quality; vaguely traditional, but not grounded in a specific era of the past.

Kurokawa's landscape offers a stark contrast to Japan's large cities, where most of the country's population is concentrated and through which all non-Japanese tourists pass on their way to the resort. Both Japanese and non-Japanese visitors describe Kurokawa as "like stepping back in time." In a year spent working at a handful of inns in the resort, it was often my job to welcome guests and accompany them through this landscape for the first time. At one inn I shuttled

Figure 4
Tourists crossing the Ta no hara River. All shops and inns follow the prescribed furusato landscape design. (Courtesy of Chris McMorran, 2012)

guests from the bus stop, passing through the heart of Kurokawa along the way. My passengers frequently commented that Kurokawa was "so nostalgic" (*natsukashii*) and that "it feels wonderful to be surrounded by nature." At another inn I swept the paths and parking lot and greeted arrivals. As I carried luggage through the tunnel of trees to the lobby, guests often remarked how fortunate I was to work in this beautiful landscape. Japanese guests sometimes expressed surprise at seeing me, saying, "I didn't expect to meet a foreigner in such a traditional Japanese place." For non-Japanese, visiting Kurokawa meant getting out of cities and visiting "the real Japan." A young Swiss couple traveling in East Asia explained, "After a week in Korea we needed to escape the crowds and big cities. This is perfect. You are surrounded by nature and can feel traditional Japan."

In dozens of glossy travel guides and magazines dedicated to Kurokawa, the landscape is the central feature. They show photographs of inn entrances framed by trees and outdoor baths next to the river. The guidebook *Precious Kurokawa*, for example, calls Kurokawa a place where one can experience "the coexistence of nature and mankind" (Urutora hausu 2003, 7), while the magazine series *Japan's Favorite Hot Springs* published its second issue on Kurokawa and introduced it as "Nestled quietly in a tiny valley, ticking off the moments of eternity" (Mapuru 2003, cover). Although Kurokawa is still largely unknown beyond Japan, influential travel guide publisher The Lonely Planet calls it "a real treasure" largely because of its landscape:

> A few dozen ryokan lie along a steep-sided valley [. . .] Considered one of the best *onsen* villages in Japan, Kurokawa is everything a resort town should be without accompanying kitsch or ugliness. While it's well frequented and you certainly won't be alone, this low-key resort still seems like it's a tiny,

> forgotten village that you've been lucky to stumble upon (The Lonely Planet 2013).

Such descriptions highlight how natural, almost organic, Kurokawa appears in the landscape. The implied contrast with large resorts like nearby Beppu, considered outdated and ugly to many Japanese and non-Japanese, is obvious.

This is the landscape the Japan Institute of Design Promotion celebrated in 2007 for its "undesigned design" (*dezain shinai dezain*) (S&T Institute of Environmental Planning and Design 2008, 34). Although this depiction may seem contradictory, it acknowledges both how effortless Kurokawa's landscape appears, and the work necessary to maintain it. One inn owner explains the "design" aspect as such, "Of course, this landscape is not just left over from old times. We made all of this. We planted the trees and built the baths with our own hands." However, he also acknowledges why it appears "undesigned": "We built it so that it doesn't look like a lot of different people built it, but like it appeared long ago" (Gotō 2005, 6). I argue that "undesigned design" neatly summarizes the relationship between Kurokawa's theme of timeless rural village (the *furusato*) and efforts by locals to design and maintain the landscape since the 1980s through what they call *fūkeizukuri* (landscape design, landscape-making). I show that due to this unique combination of factors, instead of struggling with thorny issues of authenticity that plague other themed tourist destinations, Kurokawa has come to epitomize its theme.

FŪKEIZUKURI IN CULTURAL CONTEXT

Understanding Kurokawa's landscape requires understanding two key ideas related to its construction: *fūkeizukuri* and *furusato*. The word *fūkeizukuri* consists of two parts. First is *fūkei*, one of several terms meaning "landscape," and one with its own complicated past and present in Japanese (Watanabe, Shinji et al. 2009). The Japanese have long used landscape gardens and (Chinese style) landscape paintings (*sansuiga*) to create assemblages of symbolic landscape elements. However, it was not until the 1890s that a new type of "natural" landscape was "discovered," the *fūkei*. According to literary scholar Karatani Kōjin (1993), a new interiority within the nascent modern Japanese literature at the time changed the way the Japanese perceived their surroundings, thus stimulating the "discovery of landscape" external to the self. Before this, travel centered on religious pilgrimage, the fulfillment of duties, and visits to "famous places" (*meisho*) of historical, geological, or literary significance. People would have traveled to a mundane hot springs resort like Kurokawa for the recuperative effects of the waters, but not to appreciate its landscape.

In addition to *fūkei*, other terms relate to the landscape idea, including *keshiki* and *keikan*. However, both imply a static "scene" observed from a single vantage point, and the latter is more often a technical or legal term.[1] As a long-time design collaborator in Kurokawa pointed out to me, "*Keikan* relates to things like the academic discipline of landscape engineering, the [2004] Landscape Act,[2] and landscape planning, which are all quite inflexible. In Kurokawa, we consciously use '*fūkei*' because it has a softer meaning." *Fūkei* suggests an ever-shifting landscape and a way of seeing (*mikata*) that have been inspired by Anglophone conceptions of landscape not as a concrete, static thing, but an ongoing process "at once manipulable and manipulated, always subject to change, and everywhere implicated in the ongoing formation of social life" (Schein 2010, 662). As such, *fūkei* includes an emotional element lacking in the other terms. The landscape designer put it this way, "One can say, 'When I look at that *fūkei* I cry,' but not, 'When I look at that *keikan* I cry.'"

The goal for Kurokawa's planners and residents is to create a landscape that touches visitors' emotions. This requires more than a certain assemblage of natural and built elements. It also requires the ongoing attachment to the landscape by locals and their own hard work to constantly improve it. Kurokawa's residents emphasize their active role in this process by calling their actions *fūkeizukuri*. By adding *zukuri*, from the verb *tsukuru*, meaning "making," "constructing," or "building," locals use a common linguistic device to describe the active process of "making" that which is desired. Similar to the geographical notion of "place-making," which indicates the process of fostering a sense of place (Anderson and Gale 1992; Martin 2003), Japanese have for decades engaged in *machizukuri* (town-making) and *furusatozukuri* (hometown-making) projects. In these projects, local governments aim to build a sense of community through activities like festivals (Knight 1994a; Sorensen and Funck 2007). In Kurokawa, locals create and maintain the landscape

through *fūkeizukuri*, working together to create not a static *keikan* or *keshiki*, but a *fūkei* that will demonstrate to visitors their connection to the landscape and highlight their continued efforts to recreate their chosen theme of *furusato*.

POSTWAR NOSTALGIA AND THE *FURUSATO*

Literally "old village," but often translated "hometown," or "native place," *furusato* refers to both actual and imagined places. For instance, one's actual *furusato* is the place where one was born, be it a village in Kyūshū or downtown Tokyo. Or, more removed in time and space, one's *furusato* can be the rural village where one's ancestors lived and where the family grave is located. However, just as the response to the question, "Where are you from?" can prompt an array of responses depending on the context, the geographical scale of the *furusato*—neighborhood, municipality, or prefecture—may differ depending on who is asking and where. In fact, a citizen living abroad might call Japan *furusato*, while a Tokyoite traveling to a place like Kurokawa might happily refer to it as *furusato*.

Japan's postwar experience helped lay the foundations for contemporary nostalgia for the countryside and the cultural importance of the *furusato*. Less than a generation after Japan's defeat and economic ruin in World War II, the country boasted the world's second-largest economy. By 1973, the country had experienced more than a decade of double-digit annual growth that brought relative affluence to most of the population. However, the country's economic growth had been geographically uneven. Most growth occurred in and around urban areas, fueled by a steady influx of labor from the countryside and infrastructure and industrial projects spearheaded by the state in and near urban areas (Johnson 1982; McCormack 2001). Despite ongoing state attempts to encourage economic growth elsewhere, such as through improved transportation networks, a clear rural-urban divide had grown amid the country's so-called "economic miracle."

Urbanization and steadily growing incomes from the mid-1950s onward eventually stimulated nostalgia for the perceived simplicity and wholesome values of rural life and its landscapes, which were feared to be vanishing (Ivy 1995). Such nostalgia for the rural past is certainly not unique to Japan (du Maurier 1981), but the relative similarity of landforms (75% mountainous) and the location of agricultural villages (narrow river valleys and a few broad plains) has meant the emergence of a somewhat generic image of the landscape in which that rural past occurred. The loss of the countryside implies the loss of a pillar in the construction of Japanese national identity, particularly communities engaged in rice-based agriculture (Ohnuki-Tierney 1993; Schnell 2008). Rice-growing villages are often considered "cultural exemplars," due to their association with cherished cultural values like group harmony, cooperation, and interdependence (Schnell 2008, 205), which helped frame cultural explanations of Japan's dynamic postwar economic growth (Befu 2001). As Sonia Ryang (2004) and others have shown, the simplicity and historical inaccuracy of this belief is irrelevant; for over a century it has served the political, business, and cultural elite to claim that a unique, homogenous, group-centered, cooperative Japanese identity arose from a rural landscape (Gluck 1985; Gordon 1998). For many, the countryside remains an idyll whose always-imminent loss stimulates longing for its affective and aesthetic qualities. These qualities are often crystallized in the *furusato*.

Writing about the ubiquity of the term *furusato* in 1980s-Japan, Jennifer Robertson has suggested that it can be an imagined one. She notes that *furusato* most commonly is used "in an affective capacity to signify not a particular—such as a real 'old village,' for example—but rather the generalized nature of such a place and the warm, nostalgic feelings aroused by its mention" (Robertson 1988, 495–6). These warm, nostalgic feelings can be aroused through song, story, or though natural and built elements in the landscape: "forested mountains, fields cut by a meandering river, and a cluster of thatch-roof farmhouses" (Robertson 1988, 494).

The *furusato* resembles the *satoyama*, another term associated with nostalgia for rural Japan but used more precisely by landscape ecologists and others focused on nature-society interactions. Comprised of the characters for "village" and "mountain," *satoyama* can be narrowly defined as "a sphere of 'encultured' nature that has traditionally existed on the periphery of rural settlements, but which is increasingly threatened by industrialisation, urban development, rural depopulation and changing lifestyles" (Knight 2010, 421). Sometimes used interchangeably with *furusato,*

satoyama generally indicates the buffer zone between human settlements and upland forests, where bears, monkeys, and wild boars live, and areas where humans rarely ventured in the past. The *satoyama* buffer zones comprise "the semi-managed, semi-cultivated area of woodland, shrubland and grassland surrounding human settlements" (ibid., 422). This is a space in which humans manage nature on a semi-regular basis, thinning trees for firewood or to make charcoal, searching bamboo stands for edible shoots buried beneath the soil, picking fungi and berries for consumption, and collecting undergrowth material for fertilizer.

Advocates of more sustainable agricultural and land-use practices often cite the *satoyama* as an example of a symbiotic relationship between man and nature, "born out of an intimate and even reverential connection with nature [. . .] living in a sustained way over many generations" (Williams 2010, 24). In other words, the focus is on the nature-society interaction within a relatively narrow geographical space. Importantly, this is not the space of agriculture, like the areas of rice-cultivation typically connected to the *furusato*. So, when one speaks of the *furusato* landscape, one typically includes natural elements like forests and rivers, but one emphasizes the human element and the intangible qualities the landscape evokes like group harmony, interdependence, compassion, and local identity.

The *furusato* landscape evokes a simpler time and place and provides contemporary Japanese, even those lacking a rural *furusato* of their own, a connection to the country's rural heritage. The Japanese countryside has such a powerful role as the perceived location of cultural roots that any rural village with the appropriate natural and built elements can be conceived of as *furusato*. As I explain below, tourist destinations like Kurokawa take advantage of this fact to manipulate the landscape and attract visitors.

PROTECTING THE *FURUSATO* LANDSCAPE

For decades the Japanese state has aimed to curb depopulation and encourage economic development in rural areas, not only to redistribute wealth but also to protect the rural origins of Japanese identity, its collective *furusato* (Knight 1994b; Thompson 2003). In the 1970s local governments and entrepreneurs initiated model projects, like the "One Village, One Product" (*isson ippin*) movement, which required no state assistance and were self-sustaining (Hiramatsu 1982). However, these were rare and limited in scale, and by the mid-1980s, the state believed rural areas could only be saved through large tourism development or other forms of state stimulus. Major initiatives included the 1987 Resort Law and the 1988–89 Furusato Creation Plan. The Resort Law offered corporate incentives for the construction of large leisure projects like golf courses, ski resorts, and hotel resort complexes, largely in rural areas (Moon 2002). Gavin McCormack and others have criticized this "resortification of Japan" for greasing the wheels of the corrupt construction state but failing "to invigorate declining local communities, relieve their isolation and chronic aging profile, or to provide facilities to meet the needs of the Japanese people as a whole for relaxation and recreation" (2001, 105).

The Furusato Creation Plan, on the other hand, gave a one-time grant of 100 million yen (approx. US $800,000) to all of Japan's 3,268 municipalities to help invigorate their communities through bottom-up approaches. The aim was to provide start-up capital to help locals build infrastructure (centers to celebrate local crafts and traditions, museums, community hot springs facilities) that would improve life for local residents and potentially attract tourists. Unfortunately, many projects failed, and the overall problems of outmigration and economic decline continued to trouble most parts of rural Japan throughout the 1990s and beyond (Matanle, Rausch et al. 2011).

Since the 2000s Japan's rural troubles have continued. Abandoned homes, forests, and fields are increasingly common throughout the countryside, and some villages in mountainous regions have been so devastated that they have been called "semideserted refuges for the old" (McCormack 2001, 102). Additional concern for the future of Japan's villages has stemmed from recent administrative amalgamations. This fiscal belt-tightening strategy reduced Japan's total number of municipalities from over 3,000 in 2005 to 1,730 in 2010 through the absorption of villages into larger cities and the amalgamation of multiple villages and towns into single units (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications 2010). However, the effort revealed the sensitivity of villages vanishing from the countryside. Book titles like *Vanished Village: What was the Great Heisei Amalgamation?*

(Suganama 2005) and *Vanishing Village, Surviving Village: Mountain Villages Buffeted by City/Town/Village Amalgamation* (Fujii 2006) show the continued fear about its potential loss, and by extension, the continued importance of this space in the Japanese imagination.

Against this backdrop of depopulation, desperate attempts at revival, forced amalgamations, and vanishing villages, Kurokawa, the easternmost hamlet of Minami-Oguni town, is a remarkable success story. Corporations ignored it in the wake of the 1987 Resort Law, and Minami-Oguni town used its Furusato Creation Plan funds to construct a market and tourist information center near its town center, bypassing Kurokawa altogether. Like most rural towns and villages, Minami-Oguni's population has declined since the 1950s, falling from a peak of 7,761 in 1955 to 4,687 in 2005, recovering slightly since 2000 (pop. 4,657) (Minami-Oguni Town 2012). People in local government and beyond credit Kurokawa with boosting the population figures, through stimulating dozens of new businesses and the return migration of former residents. While depopulation, aging, and economic uncertainty threaten the future of many Japanese villages, the nostalgic appeal of the countryside persists, and it is destinations like Kurokawa that tourists visit to satisfy a longing for vanishing rural landscapes. Kurokawa's leaders and residents play their part by actively producing the desired landscape.

KUROKAWA'S LANDSCAPE DESIGN NARRATIVE

Numerous books, magazines, online, and video specials depict Kurokawa's success. They describe a village teetering on extinction in the late 1970s, suffering the same problems as others in the postwar era: depopulation, a weakening economic base, a lack of infrastructure, and a bleak future. They tell of businesses competing with each other for an ever-shrinking number of tourists and arguing about how to best change their condition. Instead of succumbing to petty rivalries, closing businesses, or abandoning the village, the members of the Kurokawa Onsen Tourist Ryokan Association (hereafter the *kumiai*, as it is called by locals) banded together in the spirit of the *furusato* (Kumamoto Nichinichi Shimbun 2000; Matsuda 2001; Niwa 2002; Gotō 2005; Terebi Tokyo 2009).

In the multiple retellings of Kurokawa's history, this strategy of cooperation and interdependence becomes the secret of success. Instead of splintering, locals adopted the theme of *furusato* and wound up epitomizing it and its cultural values of group harmony, cooperation, and interdependence. Although locals admit Kurokawa's well-rehearsed tale of heroic "revitalization" (Gotō (2005) calls it *saisei*, which can also mean "rebirth") contains some exaggeration, it is worth recounting, since it shows the relevance of the theme of *furusato* in contemporary Japanese society and the power of the tale itself to celebrate and reinforce certain beliefs about the countryside. Here, Patricia Price's work on the connections between landscape and narrative is instructive. As she explains, landscapes "allow us to tell stories about ourselves to ourselves and thereby construct collective identities" (Price 2004, 23–24). In the case of Kurokawa, a collective identity has been inscribed in both the narrative and the landscape of Kurokawa, showing the relevance of the *furusato* theme in Japan today.

According to the standard narrative, Kurokawa experienced a short-lived boom in tourists in the 1960s following completion of the nearby Yamanami Highway, a toll road that linked Oita and Kumamoto prefectures. However, according to one informant the facilities and service levels were too low and the village "lacked charm" (*miryoku ga nakatta*). In other words, there was nothing to distinguish Kurokawa from hundreds of similar remote hot springs resorts scattered throughout the archipelago. As Gotō Tetsuya, owner of two successful inns in Kurokawa and now a nationally-renowned tourism expert, explains, "Kurokawa was just a backwards (*inaka*) hot spring deep in the mountains" (Gotō 2005, 7).

By the early 1980s, the rest of Japan had changed so much that Kurokawa's "backwards" landscape was appreciated in a new light. Urbanization, a massive increase in consumers with disposable income, widespread car ownership, improved infrastructure to rural areas, and an emerging nostalgia for a vanishing *furusato* landscape all laid the groundwork for Kurokawa's popularity. And while hot springs resorts like nearby Beppu and Tsuetate had built concrete hotels to accommodate tour buses filled with large groups, leaders in Kurokawa recognized a shift in Japanese tourist desires and behaviors. They began accentuating their "backwards" landscape through *fūkeizukuri* and

Figure 5
Tree-planting along streets (called michi no ryokka, "street greening") softens the landscape. (From Kurokawa Onsen no fūkeizukuri, p. 10. Reprint courtesy of S&T Institute of Environmental Planning and Design)

targeting small groups of travelers like young women, couples, and families.

Gotō Tetsuya first recognized the changing desires of tourists in the late 1970s. A second generation inn owner, he decided to renovate his inn not with modern updates, but to look older. Ideas included an outdoor bath encircled by trees and a cave bath of his making, both of which would provide guests a more rustic experience than available in most hot springs resorts. Within a few years, bookings had increased. However, Gotō was alone. He repeatedly encouraged other members of the *kumiai* to join him, explaining, "It wasn't enough for one inn to look old and attract guests. All the inns and businesses had to produce a rural atmosphere together. [. . .] to create 'Japan's *furusato*'" (Gotō 2005, 7–8). He urged others to stake their futures on the economic and ideological value of the *furusato*, even as the negative aspects of rural life—depopulation, aging population, stagnant economy—became more pronounced. Even in Kurokawa, some owners struggled with building repairs they could not afford and days or weeks without guests.

Gotō's growing success eventually convinced a new generation of younger, second- and third-generation inn owners to adopt the *furusato* theme, sometimes ignoring the advice of their fathers. By incorporating the *furusato* theme, Kurokawa's leaders would provide a space of healing (*iyashii*) for visitors suffering from, as they perceived it, "long commutes on crowded trains," "days sitting in front of a computer," and "a lack of any connection to nature." The first two steps to *fūkeizukuri* involved tree planting and bath construction. Like most mountain villages, Kurokawa was surrounded by rows of single variety plantation forests, a reminder of high domestic lumber prices in the 1960s before the market opened to less expensive imports (Totman 1989). Gotō suggested transplanting saplings from a nearby mixed forest to the front of inns and along roadsides, thereby diversifying species and softening the landscape (Figure 5). They chose trees and shrubs that would make an immediate impact, and they planted them around the newly-constructed baths to provide a feeling of being surrounded by nature and protect bathers from unwanted eyes. Varieties included dogwood, beech, maple, birch, magnolia, camellia, verbena, azalea, elm, and honeysuckle. As for baths, nearly all inns built an outdoor bath like Gotō's. However, two inns lacked sufficient space, turning away potential guests. The solution neatly fit the social aspect of the *furusato* theme: all inns agreed to allow any guest to enter their outdoor bath for a small fee. The innovation that enabled this collective use of village resources was a small wooden pass that allowed the purchaser to enter any three outdoor baths in the village. Called the *nyūto tegata* (bath pass) and introduced in 1986, it served as a concrete reminder of the interdependent ties among inns. These initial acts of *fūkeizukuri* attracted media attention. In the few months after the bath pass was launched, several television specials devoted to hot springs focused episodes on Kurokawa's innovations and nostalgic landscape, followed

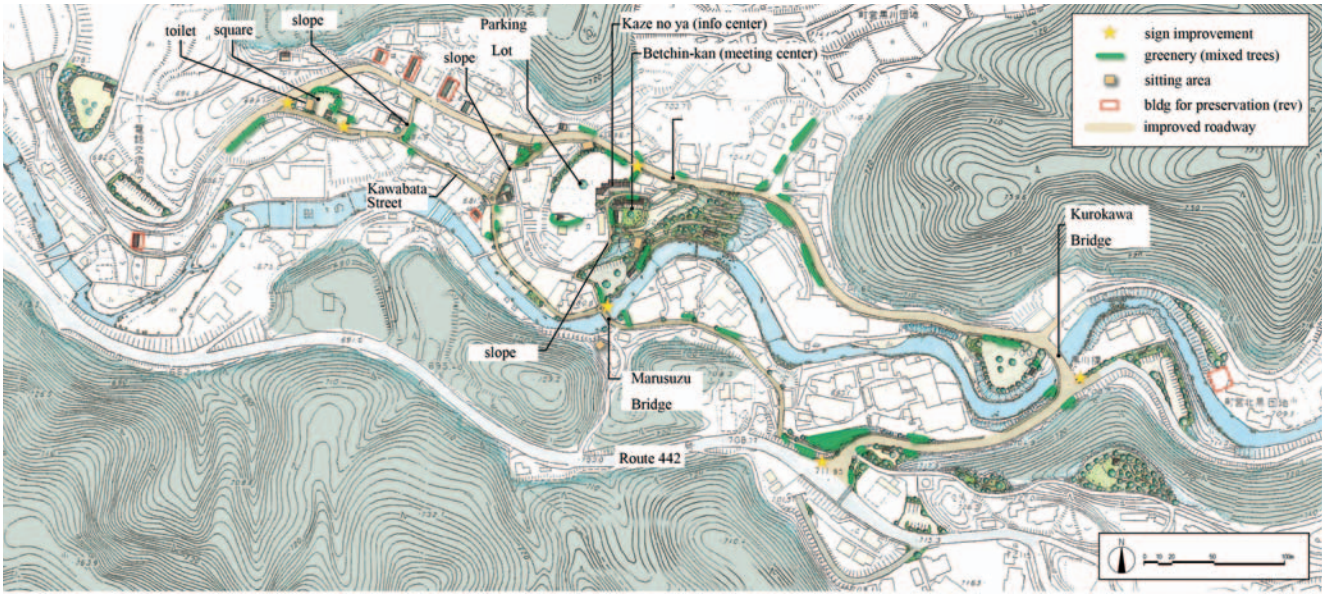

Figure 6
Fūkeizukuri design plan, 2009. (From Kurokawa Onsen no fūkeizukuri, p. 7–8. Reprint courtesy of S&T Institute of Environmental Planning and Design)

Figure 7
Signage is uniform throughout the resort, both in color (white on black) and material (local cedar). A local craftsman creates all the signs, making small differences only in the Japanese font, which each inn chooses.
(Courtesy of Chris McMorran, 2012)

Figure 8
Coca-Cola vending machine painted brown instead of bright red, next to a cigarette vending machine and map. Kumiai officials claim they were the first to ask Coca-Cola to produce a specially-colored vending machine, which would better suit Kurokawa.
(Courtesy of Chris McMorran, 2012)

by dozens of newspapers, magazines, and tabloids of all sorts (Kumamoto Nichinichi Shimbun 2000, 98–106). The country was experiencing both a hot springs boom and a widespread nostalgia for the countryside, and Kurokawa was suddenly no longer a secret that one had to stumble upon.

In the years that followed, Kurokawa continued to attract visitors to its baths and *furusato* landscape. Importantly, this did not just mean its scenery (a village full of trees, lacking modern elements like a train station and tall buildings), but also the practices of its inhabitants (a group of hard-working villagers engaged in a collective endeavor), both of which have been celebrated repeatedly. In addition to providing guests access to all outdoor baths in the village, each bath pass sold provides a profit of 190 yen (approximately US$2) to the *kumiai*. Launched in 1986, Kurokawa sold its first million passes in 15 years and its second million only six years later (2007) (Kurokawa Onsen Kankō Ryokan Kyōdō Kumiai 2012a). These proceeds have provided millions in revenue with which to hire staff, run publicity campaigns, and continually expand *fūkeizukuri* efforts (Figure 6).

Notable efforts include the establishment of uniform signs for all businesses (ca. 1987) (Figure 7), standardization of nostalgic outdoor light fixtures (ca. 1988), construction of an information center for distribution of maps and information on booking accommodations (called Kaze no ya, ca.1993), painting of all white roadside guardrails dark brown (ca. 1996), completion of a community events and meeting center (called Betchin-kan, ca. 2003), installation of large tourist maps and direction signs throughout the resort (ca. 2003), public toilets built to look traditional (ca. 2004), and streets with improved access for foot traffic and more aesthetically pleasing greenery (ca. 1999-present). To further standardize *fūkeizukuri* efforts, business leaders and residents created a comprehensive list of landscape rules for businesses and homes (ca. 2003) that explain "Kurokawa-like" (*Kurokawa-rashii*) aesthetics related to items like 1) building height and color, 2) roof color and pitch 3) appropriate greenery, 4) height and materials of garden walls, 5) billboards ("design that suits Kurokawa"), and even 6) vending machines (painted brown or placed under a structure "built with wood or highly wood-like materials") (Figure 8).

EMBODYING THE *FURUSATO* THEME

The rules and landscape alterations listed above emphasize buildings, roads, signs, and other objects that jointly create a cohesive rural idyll. While some of these changes require outside contractors and specialized permits, the majority of *fūkeizukuri* efforts, and the ones most heavily emphasized in the narrative, consist of more mundane practices. For instance, *fūkeizukuri* includes regular activities like planting trees and shrubs, river clean-up, repairing stone walls, fire prevention drills, concerts, festivals, and meetings among representatives from various stakeholder groups, including the inn owners' association (*kumiai*), the local residents' association (*jichikai*), the tourism association (*kankō kyōkai*), and the young adults' organization (*seinenbu*). Importantly, these forms of *fūkeizukuri* are not the work of a disembodied preservationist committee, nor are they the product of migrant labor that is purposefully hidden from view in order to preserve a particular narrative of how the landscape came to be (Mitchell 1996; Duncan and Duncan 2004). Nearly all *fūkeizukuri* is visible to the public, and it is sometimes photographed and shared afterward (Kurokawa Onsen Kankō Ryokan Kyōdō Kumiai 2012b).

However, *fūkeizukuri* does not involve reenactment, nor is landscape design done for the enjoyment of tourists, as in themed tourist landscapes like Colonial Williamsburg, in the United States. The *furusato* is a theme that draws on the past, while also fitting comfortably with the present. It is so generic that it avoids the sorts of challenges encountered in most themed landscapes. In fact, since a key essence of the theme of *furusato* is the affective qualities it represents, I argue that the very process of *fūkeizukuri* allows Kurokawa's citizens to actively bring the *furusato* to life. Throughout this paper I have called *furusato* a theme. However, *furusato* differs in many ways from other themed landscapes both within and beyond Japan, and it reveals several cultural aspects related to themes and the idea of authenticity.

Themes have been widely used in tourist development in Japan over the past 30 years. Following the successful launch of Tokyo Disneyland in 1983, Japan saw a boom in theme parks and theme destinations of all shapes and sizes, including those devoted to space

exploration (Space World), film (Universal Studios Japan), and even foreign countries, such as Canadian World, Azumino Swiss Village, Parque España, Russian Village, British Hills, Maruyama Shakespeare Park, and Huis ten Bosch (Dutch). In each foreign country park (*gaikoku mura*) visitors enjoy a selection of architecture, food, music, festivals, and other cultural aspects associated with the country in question. Foreign themed townscapes in the United States often spring from resident ethnic communities, such as in Solvang, CA (Danish), Holland, MI (Dutch), and New Glarus, WI (Swiss). However, foreign theme parks in Japan had no local community on which to base their themes. Instead, they adopted an invented theme like Leavenworth, WA (Bavarian) and Helen, GA (Bavarian) and tried to create an authentic replica, a complex and culturally distinctive process.

Adopting a theme is risky business for any community. The rewards can be great, with increased tourist revenues, higher property values, more jobs, opportunities for local entrepreneurs, and a landscape admired by others. However, choosing a theme requires confidence in the popularity of a theme, regardless of future political and cultural shifts. It needs adoption of the theme from as many stakeholders as possible, including political institutions, businesses, and citizens. It means a long-term commitment to an architectural style that can be confining and constant reliance on fickle tourists and the inconveniences that can come from strangers coming to town. Local residents may worry about price inflation, a shortage of parking, or even the sense that their town is no longer theirs (Frenkel and Walton 2000). As Frenkel and Walton (2000) argue though, a more pressing and contentious issue is authenticity. When a community adopts an invented theme, it already admits to being merely a replica of another place. This does not prevent the community from aiming for authenticity, however, authenticity is perceived to be of central importance for visitors. In this case authenticity is defined as replicating the original as closely as possible through "visual conformity" and "visual authenticity" (Frenkel and Walton 2000, 569). However, as theme towns learn, authenticity is an ever-fleeting goal; the more one aims for it, the more it slips away. As a theme town continues to emulate the original referent, rules must be created and enforced to maintain visual consistency. If authenticity is perceived as primarily a visual measure that requires conformity to a clear, singular referent, then any divergence from the model creates a problem. However, if authenticity is conceived differently, as it is in Japan, a lack of visual conformity is not cause for concern.

In her review of Japanese foreign country parks, Joy Hendry points out their attention to detail and to what she calls "an *internal degree of authenticity*" (Hendry 2000, 20, my emphasis). Here, she notes how authenticity is understood and performed in Japan. For instance, in most traditional forms of art, including calligraphy, flower arranging, and even martial arts like karate, stress is placed not on the finished product but on perfecting one's form (*kata*). Students learn an art by carefully copying and repeating the form of the teacher. Only this way does one slowly build muscle memory and perfect one step at a time. Interestingly, the construction of the many foreign country parks involved careful study not only of the exteriors of buildings, but how they were built. Only by understanding the form could park developers hope to faithfully recreate Shakespeare's home, for example.

This attention to form over visual result can be found elsewhere, most notably in the Grand Shrine at Ise. Every 20 years an exact replica of the existing shrine is built on a neighboring site, and the existing shrine destroyed. This practice has been taking place regularly for centuries. Some may see the replica as "new" and thus a fake (or at most a close approximation of the original). However, the focus is not on the finished product but on retention of the architectural techniques, festivals, and other social networks necessary to transport the lumber from upstream villages, shape it, and assemble the finished product at Ise. Because of this attention to form, one could argue that the "new" shrine is even more authentic than if it were the 1000-year old original.

With no single referent, Kurokawa could struggle from the same problems of inauthenticity as Bavarian Leavenworth and other towns with invented themes. Of course, Kurokawa avoids some of these concerns because the chosen theme is native to Japan. However, more important is the fact that the theme emphasizes not only the aesthetic qualities of forested mountains, gently-flowing rivers, rice fields, and a cluster of homes, but also affective qualities like interdependence and group harmony. Through *fūkeizukuri*, which

emphasizes cooperative action to shape the landscape, Kurokawa produces the most authentic *furusato* and becomes the model for its own theme.

CONCLUSIONS FROM A POWERFUL LANDSCAPE

Fūkeizukuri in Kurokawa provides a unique case of a themed tourist landscape that relies on a culturally-specific nostalgia for a rural past, while also showing its relevance in the present. Through joint efforts of *fūkeizukuri* like planting trees, Kurokawa's residents have shaped a successful tourist landscape and come to embody the theme they set out to emulate. Themed tourist landscapes may seem benign, but Kurokawa's "undesigned design" demonstrates the relevance of the *furusato* theme and its associated cultural values in contemporary Japanese society. The similarity of the built landscape makes it feel "undesigned" and exactly what a rural village should naturally look like, while the narrative depicts local residents fighting to prevent their village from vanishing beginning in the 1980s, specifically through efforts to aesthetically improve the landscape. As the story of Kurokawa's success is repeated, the narrative becomes solidified through the landscape and reinforces the notion of communal effort as a Japanese virtue. Kurokawa's success naturalizes the idea that only by sacrificing the interests of the self (or inn) can the group (Kurokawa) prosper.

Importantly, this narrative not only lionizes Kurokawa's business leaders, but also implicitly blames residents of other rural villages for their economic and social woes. For instance, when Gotō complains, "Everywhere you go in Japan, landscapes have become the same" (Gotō 2005, 18), he is also blaming the residents of other villages for failing to build a sense of local identity or resist the damaging effects of 'outside capital' (*gaibushihon*), those businesses owned by non-local Japanese corporations whose presence (and landscape choices) destroys a coherent local identity (Gotō 2005, 10). Moreover, Kurokawa's landscape narrative implies that Japan's twentieth century story of rural depopulation was not the result of the systematic prioritization of urban development at the expense of the countryside, and that any rural village could be revitalized if only residents were sufficiently cooperative, interdependent, hard working, and innovative. In this way, the *furusato* theme becomes much more than an aesthetic and affective set of associations evoking nostalgia for simpler rural past. It also becomes a source of local identity for one village and a normative force admonishing other rural villages for not realizing their inner *furusato* in contemporary Japan.

NOTES

1. Among Japanese geographers *keikan* was the preferred term for much of the twentieth century, with *fūkei* popular in literary circles. *Keikan* had a more scientific focus, relating to man's relationship with the land. German scholarship on *Landschaft* further influenced Japanese ideas on landscape (*keikan*) from the 1920s onward. In the 1980s, ideas of landscape as a "way of seeing" (*mikata*), as introduced by scholars like Denis Cosgrove and Peter Jackson, entered the Japanese academy and encouraged many to use *fūkei* instead, given its more humanistic elements. For a complete discussion of the history of the terminology of "landscape" in geography in Japan, see Watanabe, et al. (2009).
2. The Landscape Act calls on communities to protect or create beautiful landscapes for the sake of future generations, and it specifically notes the importance of landscapes in tourism. However, as Watanabe, et. al. (2009) point out, "landscape" (*keikan*) is not defined in the Act, thereby potentially causing confusion in its implementation.

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